

# MICHAEL SHEAR AND REID EPSTEIN FEIGN STUPIDITY ABOUT TRUMP'S DECADE-LONG PITCH FOR AUTHORITARIANISM

Here's what the NYT digital front page looks like for me this morning.

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Today's Paper

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2024

**In Interview, Harris Defends Biden's Record but Says She Wants to 'Turn the Page'**

Kamala Harris, in her first major interview as the Democratic nominee, embraced President Biden's policy legacy even as she distanced herself from him.  
5 MIN READ

**Vice President Kamala Harris said she had "no regrets" about defending President Biden's capabilities.**  
3 MIN READ

**Donors to the Harris campaign are pushing her to reconsider supporting a proposed tax on the wealthiest Americans.**  
6 MIN READ

**Donald Trump reposted racially and sexually charged insults of Kamala Harris. Will he alienate the voters he needs?**  
5 MIN READ

It features Kamala Harris' rather unremarkable interview with CNN (part one, part two, part three) as prominently as CNN itself (other political outlets are more focused on an upcoming Brian Kemp decision on how Georgia's election will be run, Trump's attempt to flip-flop on abortion, and yet another attempt from Trump to delay his sentence in his New York case).

Whatever.

After demanding it for a month, I get that some outlets need to claim this interview was more useful than it was.

But the remarkable thing about NYT's focus on it is they've written two stories substantially

about the same thing: The NYT's own month-long campaign to drive Joe Biden from the race.

Yet in adopting that focus, Reid Epstein and Michael Shear ignored the logic that their own outlet adopted for such an unrelenting push to oust Biden, and in the process, covered up the threat Trump poses to democracy.

Of the seven things Epstein took away from the interview, the first was an overstatement of the degree to which Kamala was "hugging" Biden's legacy versus the degree to which (for example, on fracking) she will make concessions if it achieves an overall policy goal.

Nevertheless, Epstein is right that Harris was better able to explain the success of Biden's policies, one of two reasons I was pretty sure, from the start, swapping Harris for Biden would be an improvement, justifying the swap.

As it turns out, Ms. Harris is a better salesperson for Mr. Biden's accomplishments and defender of his record than he ever was. Perhaps that's little surprise, given the president's diminished political skills and trouble speaking coherently in recent years.

Having thus maligned Biden, Epstein then claimed that Harris wants to turn the page on *both* Biden and Trump. He focused on Harris' depiction of her opponent not by name, but time period – the last decade – and quipped (I'm sure Epstein thinks this is clever!) that Biden has been prominent over the last decade and a half (treating the two years between when Biden reacted strongly to Charlottesville and the time he actually announced as part of his candidacy).

... but wants to turn the page on him as well as Trump.

What Ms. Harris did do was offer herself up as a continuation of Mr. Biden's leadership even as she distanced herself from him.

Asked by Ms. Bash if she had any regrets about defending Mr. Biden's fitness for office and ability to serve a second term, Ms. Harris said she did not and praised the president.

Then, in the next breath, she deftly put both him and Mr. Trump in the rearview mirror.

"I am so proud to have served as vice president to Joe Biden," she said. "I'm so proud to be running with Tim Walz for president of the United States and to bring America what I believe the American people deserve, which is a new way forward, and turn the page on the last decade of what I believe has been contrary to where the spirit of our country really lies."

Mr. Biden, of course, has been either president, vice president or a leading candidate for president for most of the last 15 years.

Then Epstein returned to it in his commendation for the boring interview, suggesting that Bash didn't demean Biden as much as Epstein – or rather, "Republican critics" – want.

Republican critics of Ms. Harris may have wished for a harsher grilling – or for more direct questions about how she felt about Mr. Biden's aptitude and acuity – but Ms. Bash pressed the vice president when necessary.

Shear did something similar.

His entire post focused on how Kamala answered Dana Bash's question (three minutes into the third part) of whether the Vice President regretted supporting Biden until he dropped out.

Vice President Kamala Harris said on Thursday that she did not regret defending President Biden against claims

that he had declined mentally, saying that she believes he has the “intelligence, the commitment and the judgment and disposition” Americans expect from their president.

“No, not at all. Not at all,” the vice president said when asked if she regretted saying Mr. Biden was “extraordinarily strong” in the moments following the disastrous debate in June that led him to abandon his bid for re-election a month later.

Shear did not, as Epstein did, feign confusion about what Harris meant when she adopted that “last decade” moniker. He explained – perhaps for Epstein’s benefit? – that it was a reference to Trump.

Instead, he misrepresented what she was doing with Biden, temporally, claiming that “she talked about Mr. Biden mostly in the past tense[,] with a kind of nostalgia.”

But she talked about Mr. Biden mostly in the past tense – fondly, but with a kind of nostalgia that made it clear that he no longer represents the future of the country that she hopes to be leading in January.

[snip]

“History is going to show,” she said, “not only has Joe Biden led an administration that has achieved those extraordinary successes, but the character of the man is one that he has been in his life and career, including as a president, quite selfless and puts the American people first.”

Her reminiscing about Mr. Biden’s place in history – she said it was “one of the greatest honors of my career” to serve with him – came just after she said she was determined to “turn the page” on a

decade of American politics that has not been good for the country.

“Of course, the last three and a half years has been part of your administration,” Ms. Bash reminded the vice president.

Ms. Harris said she was talking about “an era that started about a decade ago,” an apparent reference to the beginning of former President Donald J. Trump’s first campaign for the White House in 2015. She said the era represented a “warped” idea that “the strength of a leader is based on who you beat down.”

That was clearly directed at Mr. Trump, and she suggested that the warped era would continue if he returned to the White House next year. [my emphasis]

Now, in point of fact, both men misrepresented how the Vice President used that “decade” moniker. She actually used it twice. Once, the instance they focused on, in the last third of the interview, which I’ll get to.

But she also used it in response to Bash’s *very first question*, the dumb “what would you do on Day One” question that TV pundits love.

I think sadly, in the last decade, we have had in the former president someone who has really been pushing an agenda and an environment that is about diminishing the character and strength of who we are as Americans, really, and I think people are ready to turn the page on that. [My emphasis; after this, Bash snapped back, repeating the, “what would you do on Day One” question.]

That is, Harris defined what she meant by “the last decade” in what was probably her fifth sentence in the interview (possibly even fourth

– the woman may use longer sentences than me!), after introducing a focus on the middle class and a return to hope. *From her very first response*, Harris tied the way Trump (whom she never named) has diminished America to some kind of effect it might have on the middle class.

And the questions that followed that one were focused on policy, which Harris always addressed, whether in the present tense or past, in her role as Vice President. “Well first of all, we had to recover, as an economy,” Harris explained why she (and Biden) had not implemented further steps she’d like to take to help the middle class. “That’s good work,” Kamala boasted, after listing a bunch of Biden’s economic accomplishments. “There’s more to do, but that’s good work.”

In fact, Kamala’s answer to the question NYT dedicated much of two columns on, whether she regretted defending President Biden after he bombed the debate, was in the present tense.

Harris: I have served with President Biden for almost four years now and I’ll tell you it’s one of the greatest honors of my career. Truly. He cares so deeply about the American people. He is so smart and loyal to the American people. And I have spent hours and hours with him, be it in the Oval Office or the Situation Room. He has the intelligence, the commitment, and the judgment, and disposition that I think the American people rightly deserve in their President. By contrast, the former President has none of that. And so, one, I am so proud to have served as Vice President to Joe Biden. And two, I am so proud to be running with Tim Walz for President of the United States, and to bring America what I believe the American people deserve, which is a new way forward and turn the page on the last decade of what I believe has been contrary to where the spirit of our

country really lies. [my emphasis]

In a question implicitly about how successful she has been thus far, in the race, Kamala defined who Biden is, present tense, and then explicitly contrasted that to Trump. Biden has, present tense, the intelligence, commitment, judgment, and disposition to be President, and Trump has, present tense, none of that. That's what she used to springboard from her tenure as Vice President into her candidacy with Walz, a way to turn the page on the last decade that has been contrary to the spirit of the country.

Bash, like Epstein, tried to make this a gotcha, which is when Kamala explained for the second time what she was talking about.

Bash: The last decade – of course, the last three and a half years has been part of your Administration.

Harris: I'm talking about an era that started about a decade ago where there is some suggestion – warped, I believe it to be – that, the measure of the strength of a leader is based on who you beat down, instead of where I believe most Americans are, which is to believe that the true measure of the strength of a leader is based on who you lift up. That's what's at stake as much as any other detail that we could discuss in this election. [my emphasis]

But then Harris returned to what she said in that very first question: When she says "last decade" as stand-in for the opponent she won't name, she means that a different vision of leadership is as important as any of the policy questions.

Where things turn to a past tense in which Harris does not presume herself to have participated – the one that Shear quotes to support his claim that "she talked about Mr. Biden mostly in the past tense" – came in

response to her telling of how Biden told her he was going to drop out, which led her to think about how history – people in the future – will regard Joe Biden and the decision he was making, placing this past tense as past to some future time when pundits finally get their heads out of their asses.

The VP told the story: she was interrupted while making extra bacon for one of her grand nieces by a call from Joe Biden. Biden told her his decision, and, “I asked him, are you sure. And he said, yes. And that’s how I learned about it.”

The past tense Shear quoted came in response to a follow-up.

Bash had asked, and pressed a second time, whether Biden offered to endorse Harris right away. Harris responded that Biden was very clear he was going to support her (Kamala didn’t actually answer about the endorsement, but then they may have had earlier conversations), but that that wasn’t her first priority.

My first thought was not about me, to be honest with you. My first thought was about him, to be honest.

She then launched on a reflection about what, “I think history is going to show” about Joe Biden’s presidency, describing it as transformative economically, bringing back American alliances. Then she addressed “the character of the man.”

This is a question that goes back to one of two reasons Biden offered in February why he remained in the race: because he was really good at being President. The other (as I reviewed the day after the debate) was that he believed, in February, he had the best shot at beating Trump.

On July 21 – on the day that Biden was still scrambling to make the prisoner exchange with Russia even as NYT pundits were falsely reporting he was totally isolated – Biden was

still very good at being President. With the significant exception of Gaza, he may still be. By that point on July 21, though, it had become clear that Harris is better able to beat Trump. As suggested by Epstein's begrudging admission that when Kamala lays out Biden's economic accomplishments, they look pretty good, part of that is defending the things the Biden Administration did to recover from the mistakes Trump made.

But part of it is offering a contrast with Trump. Which, because Harris apparently chose not to name her opponent and not to let silly pundits demand a response to Trump's latest attention-getting provocation, as Bash did with a question about Trump's presumption to define Harris' race, the Vice President is referring to as a last decade. She did it in response to the first question, and she did it *a second time* in response to the question NYT chose to write about twice.

This is actually a pretty subtle way to do this. Obviously, Harris has befuddled two men who imagine themselves experts.

In their confusion about it, though, Epstein and Shear make a similar mistake to the one their colleague Shane Goldmacher did when he described that Kamala was running as a change candidate. They did so, even though Goldmacher himself referred to what Kamala was running against as Trump's "decade"-long "bulldozing approach" advocating for "urgent upheaval."

[S]o much of Trump's lasting influence is about his lasting attack on rule of law. The insistence that this is about incumbency obscures the real threat Trump poses to democracy, whether or not he's president.

Take this crazy Goldmacher paragraph.

For nearly a decade, Mr. Trump's bulldozing approach has been premised on the idea that the nation was staring into an abyss

and only urgent upheaval could save the country. The question for Ms. Harris is whether she can frame Democrats keeping power in 2024 as a break from that dark and divisive era.

It is true that Trump has been claiming that “only urgent upheaval could save the country.” But that was a fascist trope. It wasn’t true and even if it were, none of the policies Trump pushed would do anything but enrich people like him. Journalism should do more than observe that he made those false claims; it should explain why they’re false.

In the very next sentence, though, Goldmacher asserts that the challenge for Kamala (again adopting the dumb poll-driven assumption that she’ll only win if she is the change candidate) is by offering, “a break from that dark and divisive era.” What “era”? By reference, Goldmacher must mean that the near-decade in which Trump has told fascist lies is the “dark and divisive era” (though Trump’s racist birtherism started long before that). But it’s not an era. It’s a fascist belief, a means of exercising power, a means of dehumanizing your political opponents, one that had huge influence, but one that with the exception of the political violence it fostered, only held sway over a minority of the country (albeit a large one).

All three of these men – Goldmacher with his treatment of Trump’s tropes about America as an era, Epstein with his confusion about Harris’ (second) reference to a decade, and Shear’s invention of past tense usage that doesn’t exist – struggle because they’re viewing this exclusively about policy, even though Harris described that “the true measure of the strength of a leader” is “what’s at stake as much as any

other detail that we could discuss in this election.”

As I noted in the earlier post, when people flatten this out into policies and incumbency, they ignore the ongoing threat that Trump poses to democracy and Kamala’s vision of how to defeat it.

Kamala is running on democracy just as much as Biden did in 2020. It just looks different, because she has more successfully wrapped it in a bipartisan flag. Even there, there’s real continuity (don’t forget that one of Biden’s most important speeches about democracy in 2022, one that had a real impact on the election, was at Independence Hall).

Largely enabled by Trump’s ongoing effect – again, especially on Choice – Kamala has just found a way to make democracy matter more personally, more viscerally.

Kamala is not eschewing the incumbency she has Vice President. On the contrary, she is running on a continuation and expansion of Joe Biden’s successful policies (even if journalists are missing that). And she is running, just as Biden did, on defeating both Trump’s electoral bid but also the threat he poses to democracy itself.

This is precisely why the NYT said the stakes on Biden dropping out were so high as it kicked off a relentless campaign to force Biden out: because, first, Donald Trump was a menace, and second, Biden didn’t have what it takes to hold Trump accountable.

Donald Trump has proved himself to be a significant jeopardy to that democracy – an erratic and self-interested figure unworthy of the public trust. He systematically attempted to undermine

the integrity of elections. His supporters have described, publicly, a 2025 agenda that would give him the power to carry out the most extreme of his promises and threats. If he is returned to office, he has vowed to be a different kind of president, unrestrained by the checks on power built into the American political system.

[snip]

He struggled to respond to Mr. Trump's provocations. He struggled to hold Mr. Trump accountable for his lies, his failures and his chilling plans. More than once, he struggled to make it to the end of a sentence.

These self-imagined pros apparently haven't thought through how this all works. Epstein, at least, is still looking for his pound of flesh, for further humiliation for Joe Biden. The others are ignoring the two tasks: win an election, and reinvigorate an American dream that – because doing so would prove that democracy can deliver for the middle class – proves the value of democracy.

Kamala Harris is, in no way, disavowing Joe Biden. Rather, even as she's pitching their joint policy success, she's renewing the effort to package an American exceptionalism that can defeat Trump's American carnage.

In 2020, Joe Biden, a member of the Silent Generation, offered a defense of democracy as democracy, which was enough for people who remember fascism and actual communism. In an era when many have forgotten that history and lost faith in democracy, GenX Kamala Harris has to do something more: She has to sell democracy, which Trump has been discrediting for a decade, itself.